STRATEGIES FOR DE-ESCALATING STUDENT BEHAVIOR IN THE CLASSROOM

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Purpose

This practice brief provides practical, research-based strategies educators can use to de-escalate challenging student behavior in the classroom. Despite the development of supportive, safe, and predictable school environments, students may, at times, become agitated, and their behavior may escalate to unsafe levels. With some advance planning, educators can reduce reliance on reactive strategies, such as punitive or exclusionary practices (e.g., restraint, seclusion, suspension, expulsion) in favor of safer, more instructive, and inclusive approaches.
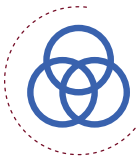
Incorporating De-escalation Practices within a Schoolwide Prevention Framework

The effectiveness of de-escalation strategies is maximized when integrated within a school-wide multi-tiered behavioral framework, such as school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), which lays the foundation for effective school-wide and classroom level social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) supports for all students. Within a PBIS framework, educators consistently support and respond to students' SEB needs (Center on PBIS, 2021; Office of Special Education Programs, 2015), and prevention is the cornerstone of a PBIS approach. Tier 1 prevention strategies minimize the likelihood of SEB challenges arising in the classroom by creating positive, predictable, and engaging learning environments. As described by the Center on PBIS (2021), prevention strategies include:

- Creating **safe and inclusive environments** where all members of the community (students, educators, and families) belong,

- Developing and explicitly teaching clear **positive behavior expectations** and critical SEB skills (e.g., working in groups, solving disagreements, asking for help),

- Having and explicitly teaching clear and **consistent classroom routines** (e.g., transitions, arrival, and dismissal),

- Providing **engaging academic instruction** that matches students' instructional level and incorporates frequent and varied opportunities to respond similarly prevents off-task and disruptive behavior, and

- Regularly **acknowledging** prosocial behavior and **redirecting and/or reteaching** when behavioral errors occur.

By explicitly teaching, prompting, and practicing critical SEB skills and routines with students, educators can foster positive relationships with students (Blair et al., 2022), decrease the likelihood of situationally inappropriate behaviors, and avoid power struggles that may lead to escalation (Conroy et al., 2009; Niwayama et al., 2020; Whitney & Ackerman, 2020). To find out more about preventive PBIS practices in the classroom, please see: Supporting and Responding to Students Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs: Evidence-Based Practices for Educators.[1]

It is important to note, however, that even within schools and classrooms implementing PBIS with fidelity, behavioral errors commonly occur and should be anticipated. An essential aspect of preventing behavioral escalation for all students is for educators

to have effective Tier 1 strategies for quickly and efficiently addressing lower-level challenges (e.g., situationally inappropriate language, off-task behavior) that commonly occur in the classroom. For students who require additional behavior support to be successful, targeted (Tier 2) and intensive individualized (Tier 3) interventions, should be explicitly linked to Tier 1 practices, to create a seamless continuum across the tiers; see Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in the Classroom.[2]

Literature describing de-escalation within a PBIS approach often focuses on Tier 3. For students with intensive (Tier 3) SEB support needs, teams conduct comprehensive and functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) and develop individualized behavior support plans (BSPs), which may include crisis management plans. The strategies we describe are not meant to take the place of student-specific strategies in an individualized plan. Instead, educators may implement de-escalation strategies throughout the continuum to support any student who may become escalated and provide a foundation of de-escalation support for all students.

All students, including students who require more intensive support, can benefit from a universal approach that promotes a consistent response to behavioral escalation by all staff that is not overly reliant on exclusionary practices and intrusive crisis responses, such as restraint and seclusion. In this brief, we (a) provide an overview of self-regulation and escalation, (b) highlight class-wide interventions specifically designed to prevent low-level challenging behaviors from escalating, and (c) share strategies educators can use to respond to and verbally

de-escalate more intense student behavior. **We intend this brief to be used in conjunction with district-approved crisis response training and protocols (and not as a stand-alone resource on de-escalation or crisis response).**

Understanding Self-Regulation

De-escalation is the process of preventing a challenging situation from becoming worse. Before selecting specific strategies for de-escalating challenging situations in the classroom, it can be helpful to understand what we mean by behavioral regulation. Regulation is a state of being where an individual feels safe, present, and engaged (Dishion & Connell, 2006). A student who is regulated is typically able to engage with academic material, focus on tasks, respond to instructions from adults, and interact with adults and peers in ways that fit within the context or situation. Students who are regulated may still occasionally engage in challenging behavior, but they respond when redirected using Tier 1 class-wide behavior management strategies (e.g., brief verbal reminders).

When universal classroom management strategies are unsuccessful and challenging behavior continues or begins to escalate, this can be a sign of dysregulation or what is sometimes referred to as a fight, flight, or freeze response (Souers & Hall, 2016). Dysregulation is characterized by:

- **fight or flight** (hyperarousal), which can lead to emotional reactivity, aggression, and unsafe behaviors such as elopement, or

- **freeze** (hypoarousal), during which a student can shut down, disconnect from those around them or disassociate from the situation.

Students who are dysregulated are often unable to follow directions, learn new information or tasks, or reflect on their own behavior in the moment.

Addressing dysregulation often requires a combination of teacher directed techniques and student self-regulation strategies. Self-calming or self-regulation strategies have been shown to effectively help students overcome feelings of dysregulation (Felver et al., 2016; Weist et al., 2018), but they must be taught and practiced ahead of time in contexts when the student is calm. Teaching self-regulation involves helping students to first recognize feelings of agitation/dysregulation when they first become upset and then use a practiced strategy for returning to a calm state. Our goal is to provide educators with strategies to prevent dysregulation and support students' return to self-regulation in safe and compassionate ways.

Phases of Escalation

Figure 1 shows a model of the four phases of the de-escalation cycle: prevention, escalation, crisis, and recovery and restoration (adapted from Colvin & Scott, 2014). As the model indicates,

different strategies are effective at different phases of escalation (see Figure 1). This does not suggest that students will always follow the phases linearly, rather identifying the student's phase in the cycle is instructive in selecting the most effective means of responding to challenging behavior and facilitating a return to self-regulation. When selecting de-escalation strategies, it is recommended that educators and teams begin by assessing their existing schoolwide and classwide practices to (a) identify effective de-escalation strategies already in place and ensure all staff have received training in these practices and (b) determine changes and additions that may further benefit students and help prevent behavior escalation.
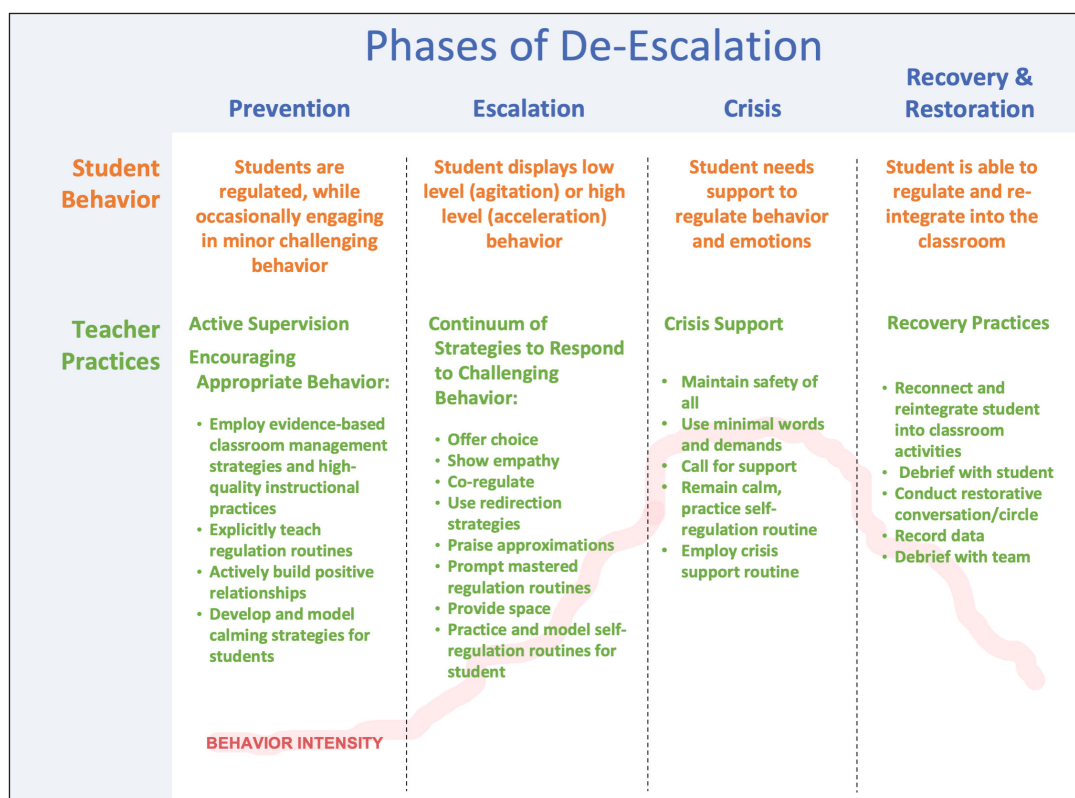
Phases of De-Escalation

	Prevention	Escalation	Crisis	Recovery & Restoration
Student Behavior	Students are regulated, while occasionally engaging in minor challenging behavior	Student displays low level (agitation) or high level (acceleration) behavior	Student needs support to regulate behavior and emotions	Student is able to regulate and re-integrate into the classroom
Teacher Practices	Active Supervision Encouraging Appropriate Behavior: • Employ evidence-based classroom management strategies and high-quality instructional practices • Explicitly teach regulation routines • Actively build positive relationships • Develop and model calming strategies for students	Continuum of Strategies to Respond to Challenging Behavior: • Offer choice • Show empathy • Co-regulate • Use redirection strategies • Praise approximations • Prompt mastered regulation routines • Provide space • Practice and model self-regulation routines for student	Crisis Support • Maintain safety of all • Use minimal words and demands • Call for support • Remain calm, practice self-regulation routine • Employ crisis support routine	Recovery Practices • Reconnect and reintegrate student into classroom activities • Debrief with student • Conduct restorative conversation/circle • Record data • Debrief with team

BEHAVIOR INTENSITY

Figure 1. Phases of De-Escalation (adapted with permission from Midwest PBIS Network Phases of De-Escalation graphic)

Prevention

In addition to having Tier 1 strategies for supporting and responding to students' SEB needs, it is important for educators to (a) proactively and directly teach self-management, or self-regulation, strategies and (b) regularly practice regulation strategies with all students as part of teaching and practicing classwide expectations. This teaches all students the important skill of self-regulation and allows an educator to remind a student who is dysregulated to use a strategy they have previously practiced.

Similarly, educators may benefit from learning and regularly practicing strategies for regulating their own emotional responding during times of stress and crisis. As with student routines, adult routines should be practiced regularly when calm, so they are easier to recall during times of escalation or crisis. Table 1 provides some specific examples of strategies for supporting student and staff regulation. These strategies can be practiced as a class for all students and educators, with additional individual practice opportunities embedded throughout the school day for individuals who require additional support.

Table 1. Examples of Strategies for Supporting Student and Staff Regulation

Strategy	Definition	Examples
Regulation Strategies for Students	Teach and regularly practice regulation strategies with all students as part of Tier 1 support. Initially teach when all students are calm and relaxed, gradually working toward practicing in settings or situations that can lead to dysregulation for some students (e.g., before quizzes and tests).	Regulation strategies can include deep breathing, mindfulness, progressive muscle relaxation, and requesting/taking a break in the classroom. Emotional scales, such as a 0-10 "feelings thermometer," can be used to teach students to rate their feelings/stress/anxiety and prompt coping and relaxation strategies.
Regulation Strategies for Adults	Model for students and regularly practice (using think aloud strategies) the regulation routines students are being taught. Seek professional development opportunities focused on stress-reduction strategies for staff.	Become aware of your own triggers for dysregulation. Use self-prompting strategies (e.g., visual reminders, timers) to prompt regular use of regulation strategies. Teacher resources: Habits of Effective Classroom Practice;[3] Don't Discipline Hangry: 3 Steps to a Better Classroom[4]

Escalation

While prevention is essential, proactive approaches and strategies are not always successful in preventing escalation. When challenging behaviors persist, disrupt the learning environment, and increase in intensity, we call this the escalation phase. Students can display escalating behaviors during agitation and/or acceleration phases of escalation.

AGITATION

Agitation occurs when a student presents challenging behavior that is slightly elevated in intensity, such as persistent talking out of turn after being given a verbal reminder, wandering the classroom during instruction, or making inappropriate comments to peers. This type of behavior can frequently be redirected by educators through the use of the strategies in Table 2.

As always, educators monitor their use of re-direction strategies to ensure they (a) quickly fade the use of re-direction by enhancing prevention approaches (e.g., prompt student to use regulation strategy before entering a challenging routine) and (b) avoid accidental reinforcement (e.g., inadvertently increasing escalated behavior by regularly providing attention during escalation).

Table 2. Examples of Strategies for Agitation Re-direction

Strategy	Definition	Examples
Choice	Provide the student with a small number (2-3) acceptable options for completing the task.	"You can complete the worksheet independently or with a partner. Which would you prefer?"
Redirection	Provide a brief statement that prompts engagement in a more appropriate task or behavior. Effective statements are short, provided with neutral emotion, and may be delivered privately.	"Andy, try starting on the second section and come back to that one." "Jesse, remember to ask for help if you're feeling stuck."
Co-regulation	Assist students in regulating their emotions by expressing empathy, acknowledging and labeling their emotions, modeling desired behavior, and providing positive reinforcement for following expectations.	"Rosa, I want to make sure you are okay. I see that you are angry because your face is red, and your fists are clenched. When I feel angry, I like to take three deep breaths and count to 10. Watch me and we can do it together."
Prompt Regulation Routines	Prompt use of calming and self-regulation strategies that have been previously taught and mastered as part of a proactive preventive approach.	"Would it help to use your 4-square breathing?" "Cielo, you can grab a quick drink of water and then try again."
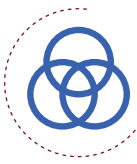
ACCELERATION

Acceleration occurs when initial strategies are ineffective, and the student moves into a higher level of dysregulation. Students often move faster through their escalation cycle in the acceleration phase and present increasingly disruptive behaviors such as inappropriate language (e.g., swearing), property destruction (e.g., tearing up work and classroom materials), and verbal harassment (e.g., threatening peers). This higher level of challenging behavior can often still be effectively de-escalated to prevent a crisis situation, but students may be less responsive. During this phase, educators can attempt de-escalation using strategies such as ones found in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of Strategies for De-escalation During Acceleration

Strategy	Definition	Examples
Reminders of regulation routine	Provide student with reminder (verbal or visual) using minimal verbal directions to prompt mastered regulation or calming routine. Reminders should be brief and provided using a neutral tone and may be delivered privately.	Point to deep breathing poster in classroom: "John, remember our deep breathing strategy."
Provide space	Give the student room while remaining close enough to monitor behavior. When signs of dysregulation occur, prompt student to go to a break space or safe space to cool down.	Continue to actively supervise student while moving around the classroom to check in with other students. Teacher moves close to student: "Jamie, you seem frustrated. You are welcome to take time to cool down in the break space."
Co-regulation with Limited Words	As described above, but shorter and less descriptive.	"Mica, you're crying. Let's grab some tissues and sit down together."

Crisis

Crisis is the peak of dysregulation. A student in crisis is often unable to regulate their behavior independently and may need support to get out of the flight, fight or freeze response mode. For example, during a crisis, a student might engage in highly disruptive behaviors (e.g., yelling/screaming at teachers or peers) or present a safety concern (e.g., throwing classroom materials, attempting to harm themselves or others). While the signs and signals of escalation may have happened quickly and may seem to come out of nowhere, there are often triggering events that educators can identify, which led to the student being dysregulated.

In this phase, the goal is to maintain the safety of all and prevent further escalation, while supporting the student until they are ready for recovery. When addressing a student in crisis it is critical for staff to have a well-rehearsed crisis support routine to maintain adult regulation and help ensure consistent implementation of the crisis plan.

Your crisis support routine should prioritize district approved crisis responses (e.g., communication protocols, safety protocols), which may incorporate the strategies listed in Table 4, to maximize student safety.

Table 4. Examples of Strategies for Crisis Response

Strategy	Definition	Examples
Maintain safety with district-approved protocol	Minimizing risk of harm to the student or others by following district-approved crisis protocols to request support and maintain safety. Be familiar with the teams available in the school (Crisis team, Tier 3 team, Administration, etc.) and established protocols, in order to be prepared to make that call when the time comes. Refer to individual student/school building crisis plan for details	Call/text for administrator assistance to support the student. Give the student space with supervision and/or escort other students in the classroom out of the space. Remove items close to the student that might pose harm (i.e., scissors, sharp objects, staplers, computers).
Use minimal words and demands	When a student is in crisis, they often struggle to listen and attend to directions due to their physiological arousal. This is not the time to present consequences for behavior, instead provide space and calm for the student, limiting words and demands.	"Thank you for sitting down, Piper." "I am here when you are ready, Eli." See Figure 2 for more on crisis support routines
Stay Calm	Attend to your own state of physiological arousal and practice self-regulation strategies. If you find yourself escalating and additional supports are available/it is safe to do so, take a break from the situation to regain calm. Remember, you cannot use your skills to regulate the intensity of the situation if you are experiencing behavior escalation.	Ask to leave the space if there are other adults in the room to supervise the student(s). Take 3 deep breaths before talking to student. Notice your heart rate and remind yourself to relax.

Remember, the strategies included in this brief are NOT a replacement for thorough training in crisis prevention and response strategies. Rather, these practices can be used to enhance and support your implementation of district-approved practices.

Figure 2. Example Crisis Support Routines

Recovery and Restoration

De-escalation following a crisis can be thought of in two stages. First, there is the immediate period of recovery following an intense behavioral incident, during which both staff and the student (and often their peers) need to regulate, reinstate calm, and resume typical classroom activities. For example, immediately following a crisis, a student can be tired or exhausted, quiet, or embarrassed. Recovery can last a few minutes, a few hours, or for the rest of the school day, depending on the student's temperament and the intensity of the behavior exhibited. During recovery, the focus is on using strategies to restore normal routines such as the ones in Table 5.

Table 5. Examples of Strategies for Crisis Recovery

| Strategy	Definition	Examples
Welcome Student	Welcome the student back into the space in a positive manner. This can be done discretely 1:1 or in front of the entire class, depending on student preferences and needs. This signals to the student that they are accepted and valued and models to the class that the student is welcome into the classroom community.	"Leela, welcome! We are so happy to have you back in class. Take a seat at your desk."
Reintegrate	Allow student to take part in regular classroom activities. Provide student clear expectations and directions for the activity, acknowledge the student's needs, and give positive praise for following expectations.	"Quinn, would you like to start read aloud with us? The expectation is that students will sit at their desks quietly and read along or draw while I read aloud." "Quinn, thank you for quietly going to your seat and getting your book."
Focus on Present	Allow students time to regain self-regulation, re-integrate into the classroom, and get back to baseline before discussing consequences or debriefing. Bringing up the crisis situation too early can re-escalate a student.	Refraining from making comments about behavioral incident or reviewing consequences right away.

Once the student, staff, and peers have had a chance to return to regulation, restoration—the final stage of de-escalation—can begin. Restoration, may include reparations (e.g., cleaning up materials that were thrown, redoing an assignment that was torn up, apologizing to a peer) that are meaningful and contribute to the classroom community. These reparations may help students to recognize how their actions affected others in the classroom. It is also important during the restoration stage for staff to guide student self-reflection on the incident with the goal of **(a) understanding what events led to escalation and (b) identifying strategies for preventing escalation in similar situations in the future.** This step provides staff the opportunity to use information gathered from the student and reflections on their own behavior during the escalation incident to consider how to modify classwide behavior support strategies to better fit student need. Steps to facilitate restoration can be found in Table 6.

Table 6. Examples of Strategies to Facilitate Restoration

Strategy	Definition	Examples
Debrief with Student	Set aside time to help the student reflect on and describe their perception of the escalation incident to identify events/circumstances that led to the escalation, thoughts and feelings the student was having at the time, and strategies that staff and the student can use to foster self-regulation when similar events/thoughts/feelings occur in the future.	Create a debrief checklist to guide the conversation and allow the student to reflect on their answers to questions such as: • "Can you describe what was happening when you started to get upset? What were you feeling just before you became dysregulated? Can you show me where you were on the feelings scale?" • "Let's talk about ways that you can let me or another adult know when you are feeling upset/nervous/scared and need a quick break." • "How would you like for me to prompt you to take a break, use a calming strategy, or ask for help when I notice that you are becoming agitated?" Co-create a plan with the student for how and when to prompt use of self-regulation strategies and provide instruction on regulation skills.
Staff Debrief and Self-reflection	Staff review escalation cycle and reflect on their own behavior and current classwide preventive strategies to (a) identify strategies for remaining calm during student escalation/crisis (as needed) and (b) identify appropriate next steps for better supporting the student and preventing behavioral escalation.	Encourage staff self-reflection[5] Consider the nature of the behavioral incident and information gathered as part of the student debrief to identify next steps (e.g., provide student with additional opportunities to practice and receive feedback on use of regulation strategies, monitor student behavior to identify triggers and patterns, refer student for additional assessment and support, revise current supports to better emphasize prevention, promote high-fidelity implementation of proactive function-based plan).
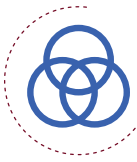
Conclusion

As part of an inclusive classwide system of support, educators build strong student-teacher relationships, implement consistent instructional strategies, and use evidence-based responsive interventions to prevent student behavior from escalating to unsafe levels. Whether working with students who experience low-level or more intense behaviors, this practice brief can be a resource to help teachers feel better equipped to work through the de-escalation process.

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Embedded Hyperlinks

1. https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers

2. https://www.pbis.org/resource/multi-tiered-system-of-supports-mtss-in-the-classroom

3. https://www.pbis.org/resource/habits-of-effective-classroom-practice

4. https://www.pbisapps.org/articles/dont-discipline-hangry-3-steps-to-a-better-classroom

5. https://www.midwestpbis2.org/training-content/de-escalation